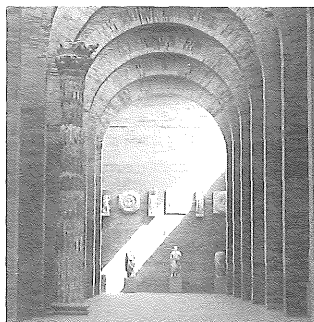
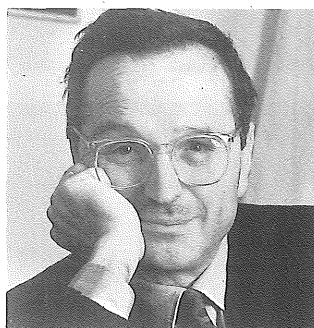


PROFILE ■ Rafael Moneo: the rigorous eclectic

Spanish architect Rafael Moneo draws inspiration from sources as diverse as Utzon and Rossi, says Antón Capitel.



Born in 1937, Rafael Moneo qualified in Madrid in 1961. He went to Denmark to work with Jørn Utzon on the Sydney Opera House and spent two years in Rome before returning to set up his own practice in Madrid. He first gained international recognition with the Roman art museum, Mérida (above). From 1985-90 Moneo was chairman of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard.

One of the most important architects on the international scene, Rafael Moneo is perhaps the figure of greatest interest in Spanish architecture today. Born in 1937, he trained in Madrid, where he was a disciple and assistant of the pioneer modernist Sáenz de Oiza. Qualifying in 1961 Moneo began his professional career when the so-called school of Madrid was turning away from the International Style towards a local version of Nordic 'organic' architecture – an interest that led Moneo in the early 60s to work with Utzon in Denmark on the Sydney Opera House project. From 1963-65 he was a scholar at the Spanish Academy in Rome.

By the late 60s Moneo had developed a distinctive architecture that represented a shift within the modern. The housing project at San Sebastian (1968, with Marquet, Unzurunzaga & Zulaica) was perhaps the clearest example of this. The design, with its perimeter blocks and internal courtyards, harmonised with the grid plan of the city, with its perimeter buildings and internal courtyards, while modifying the urban image on the frontage to the river Urumea.

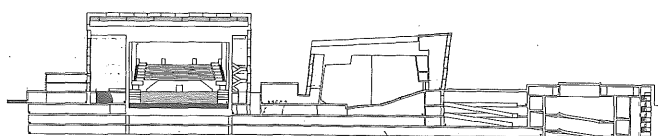
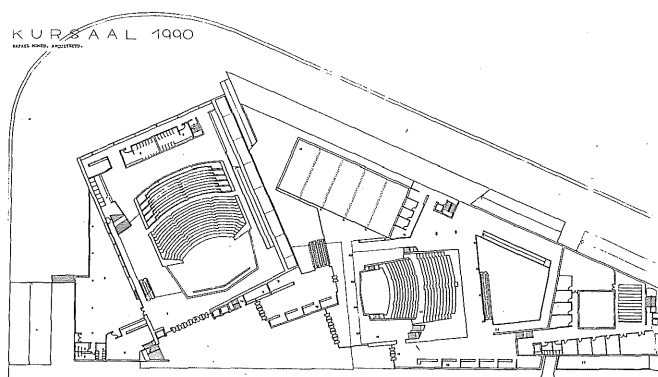
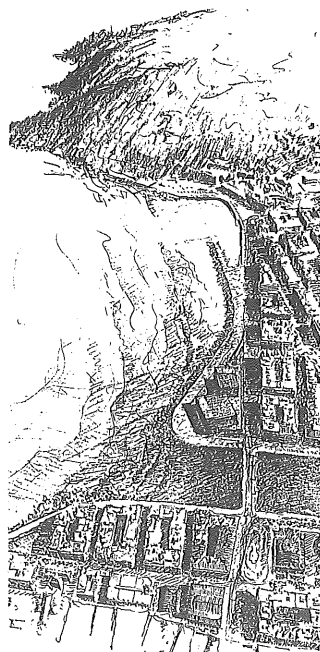
During the 70s, both from his built work and his position as professor of architecture at Barcelona, Moneo became prominent in the new generation of

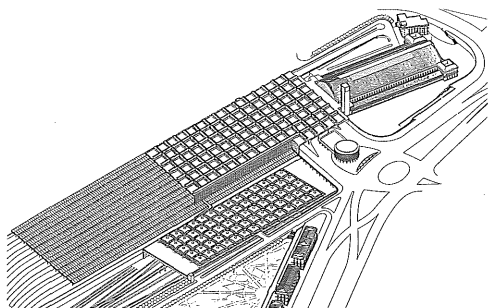
Spanish architects responding to the 'refundación disciplinar' ('return to discipline') based on the ideas of the Italian architect and theorist Aldo Rossi.

The project that led to Moneo's recognition as leader of the new wave of Spanish architects was the enlargement of the Bankinter building in Madrid (1970-76, with R Bescós). This project broke with the modern obsession with novelty and continued formal advance by combining ideas drawn from Rossi and Venturi with references to various distinct themes within the modernist canon. In contrast to the modernist notion of the building as a free-standing object, the Bankinter building is essentially urban or background architecture, supplying a frontage to the important Paseo de la Castellana, the main artery of the city, while pulling back at ground level in deference to the existing nineteenth-century villa.

But if that urban, compositional quality allies it figuratively with Rossi, the form of the building – with the facade presented without its normal base – links it with the ideas of Venturi and even with Aalto.

Discernible in the Bankinter building are some key themes of Moneo's architecture: first, the use of the modern tradition as a source of motifs and, second, the recognition of every architectural

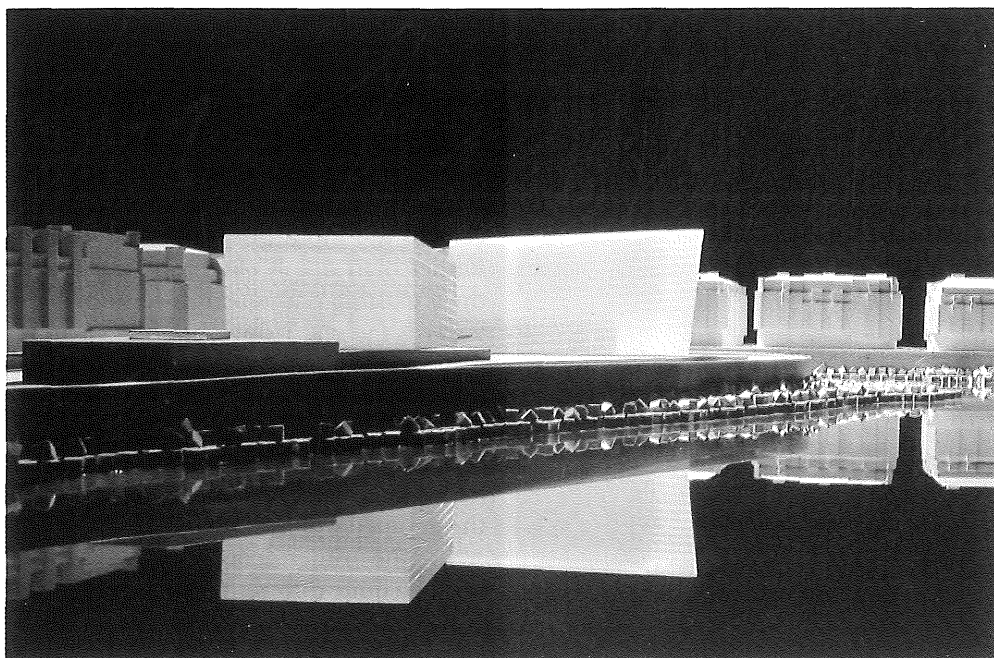
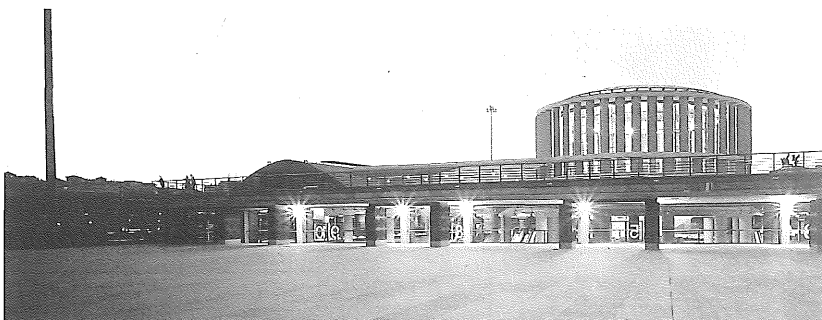




intervention as a unique and distinct opportunity involving both the universal and the particular. From this understanding of architecture as a formal question of intention and reflexion – as a discipline which acts through the medium of thought – arises the eclectic quality of the work: Moneo's is a distinctive voice that is capable of a wide diversity of design statements.

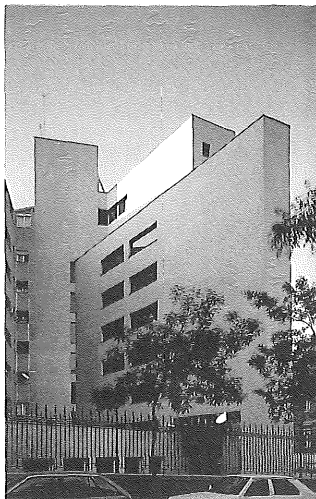
While the Bankinter gave Moneo his reputation in Spain, the Museo de Arte Romano in Mérida (1980-85) led to recognition abroad. The museum is a voluminous building constructed over an important Roman archaeological site, which is preserved in the spectacular basement gallery. The museum is conceived as a grand factory in the Roman manner, constructed from a core of concrete with a permanent shuttering of brick. Repeated parallel walls, massive in scale, are penetrated by a series of great arches of Roman proportions, which in combination create a space comparable to that of an ancient basilica. It is in this sense an ancient space that has been created on modern principles.

Material construction as something present in the content and image of the architecture; the thoughtful amalgamation of principles drawn from history with

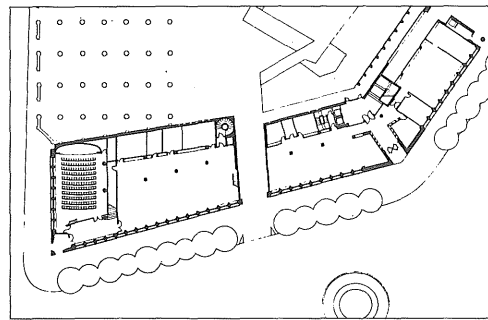
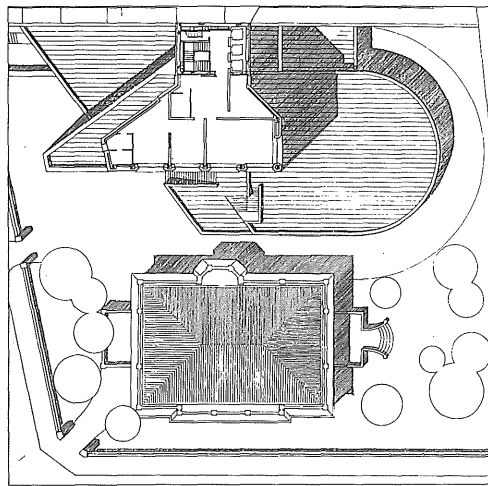


Top Atocha station, Madrid. The construction of a new commuter station and the restoration of the adjacent long-distance station has created a new pedestrian plaza. The rotunda serves as a meeting and orientation point, its slender forms permeated by light (photos: Hisao Suzuki).

Left Gran Kursaal, model. Two glass volumes, aligned obliquely to the grid of the city, house the two auditoria, which are linked below ground.



Above and right *The Bankinter building, Madrid (1970-76). "Bankinter rises on a site in the Castellana, one of the streets with most character in Madrid, next to a small 18th-century palace of delicate workmanship. It is planned as an unobtrusive background against which the palace assumes greater importance" (RM) (Right photo: H Suzuki).*
Below *La Previsión Mutua, Seville (1982-87). "The form, sober in its dimensions and proportions, reflects the tripartite treatment (base/piano nobile/attic) characteristic of public buildings in Seville" (RM).*



modern techniques; the strong relationship with the location and with the theme and content of the building itself; such are the characteristics of the Mérida museum. In line with a particularly Spanish tradition of reticence, it offers a mediation between tradition and modernity which resorts to neither the superficial scenography of the post-modern nor the technological obsession and sculptural novelty of the late-modern.

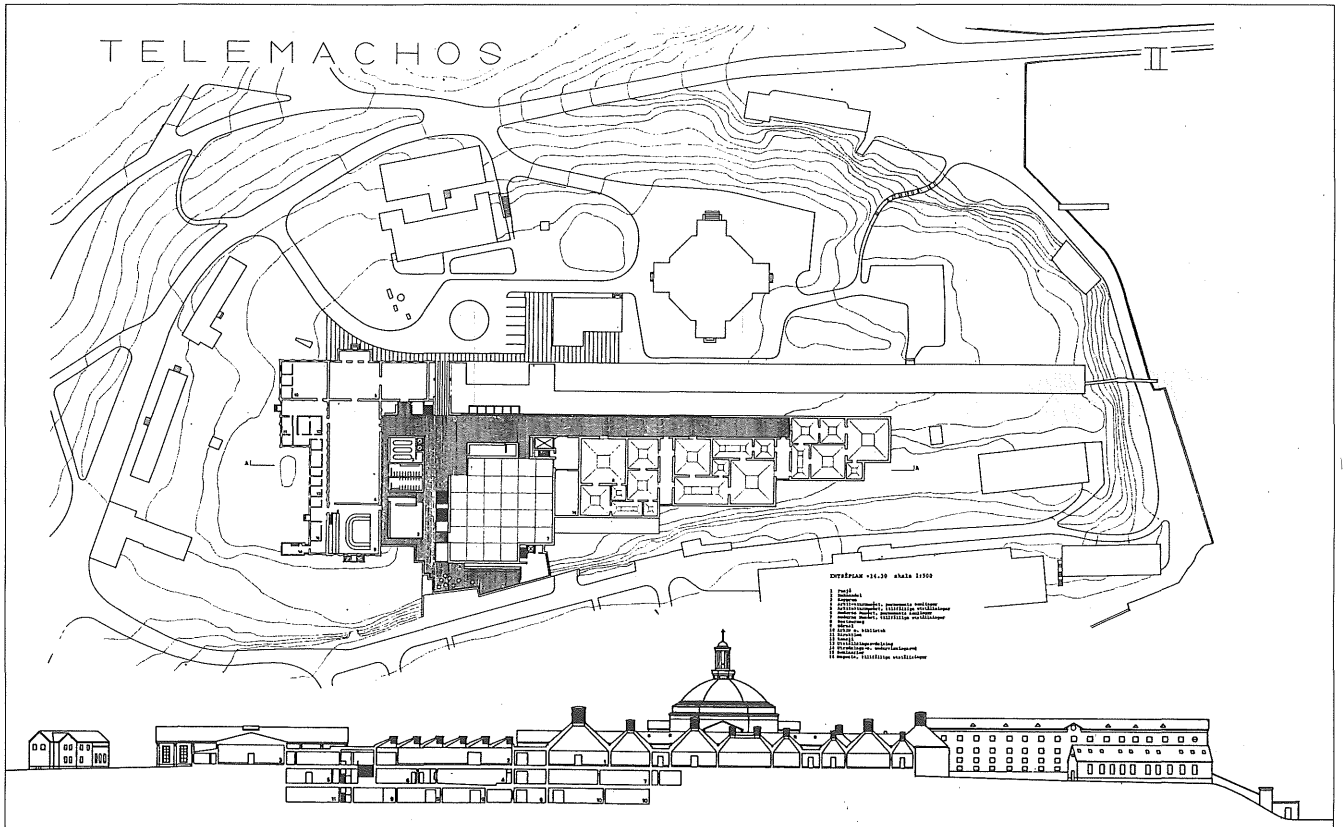
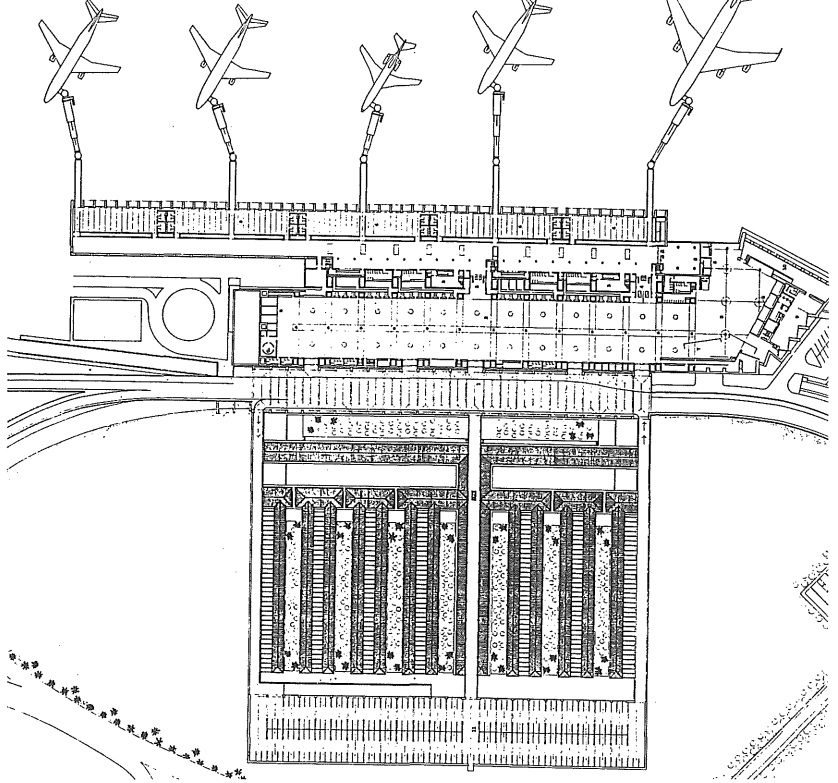
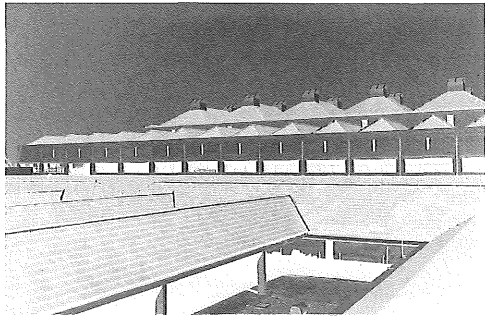
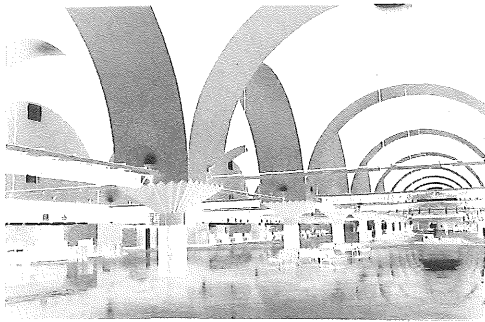
The Mérida museum was followed by the Previsión Mutua de Seguros building in Seville (1982-87) and the Atocha station in Madrid (1985-91) which again showed how, in differing circumstances, a unitary vision of architecture can produce very different results.

Among recent buildings by Moneo the new airport at Seville (1989-91) has provoked heated professional discussion. Engaged by the Ministry of Transport following the Atocha station commission, the airport was constrained in funding and limited in the time available for both design and construction. In these conditions Moneo felt that there could be no attempt at aeronautical imagery, in the manner of Foster at Stansted. Instead the airport is conceived as a walled building with traditional finishes which avoids any clear external image. The emphasis is on the internal space, with a large landscaped parking area in the form of an enclosed garden. The building eschews symbolism in the interests of place, its formal character making a sophisticated response to Sevillian architecture.

Recently Moneo has won three international limited-entry competitions: the Gran Kursaal Palace of Congress at San Sebastian in Spain (1990); the Stockholm Museum (1991); and the Palazzo del Cinema in Venice (1991).

The San Sebastian competition (in which other entrants included Botta, Foster and Isozaki) envisages the construction of a Palace of Congress (Gran Kursaal) on a maritime promontory adjacent to the mouth of the river Urumea. Rather than simply extending the grid of the existing nineteenth-century city towards the sea, Moneo opts for an architecture that is abstract, simple and almost sculptural in its plasticity. The two auditoria take the form of two free-standing volumes of dense glass, which are linked below ground and aligned obliquely to the geometry of the city.

In the other competitions Moneo makes a quite different response. The site for the Stockholm Museum is on an island with a rich landscape and existing

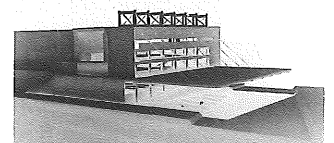


buildings. Moneo ties the building to its site by breaking down its scale. Each of the main internal volumes is identified externally by prominent roof lanterns, which perform the role of formal rupture, repetition and integration. Possibly these Nordic 'organic' inflections made the jury think that, in choosing this project, they had awarded the prize to Jørn Utzon, who had also entered the competition.

In the competition for the Palazzo del Cinema in the Lido at Venice Moneo showed that he was concerned with brief and location, rather than with any stylistic

preoccupation. The building has a maritime character reminiscent of the rationalism of the 20s (and notably that of Hannes Meyer). The building is a compact volume disposed internally as a large open platform occupied by the two auditoria longitudinally disposed. Externally the volume is modified solely by the portecochere of the entrance, which looks over the canal and suggests a great ship which seems to be heading from the Lido towards the city of Venice.

Antón Capitel is an architect and professor at the school of architecture in Madrid.



Top The new airport at Seville (1989-91), organised around a 'garden' car park.
Above middle Competition-winning design for the Stockholm Museum (1991).
Above Competition-winning design for the Palazzo del Cinema, Venice Lido (1991).